

Experiential Planning: A Practitioner's Account of Vancouver's Success

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Problem: Vancouver, BC has achieved international acclaim for its livability and compact urban form, making it one model of good planning practice. What techniques and strategies contributed to effective planning practice in the city?

Purpose: This article shares stories from a prominent practitioner in Vancouver, illuminating some of the techniques and processes planners used to help develop consensus around building a socially responsible and progressive city.

Methods: The article presents results from interviews with Larry Beasley, the former director of current planning with the City of Vancouver. Excerpts from the interviews illustrate his locally situated theory of planning practice.

Results and conclusions: Beasley's stories of practice are not those of a heroic planner, but affirmations of basic planning principles: good processes, practical ethics, and effective organization. Beasley's model of "experiential planning" pursues good city form and function using socially just and politically responsive participatory processes. Vancouver planners helped build consensus by framing meaningful visions based on the everyday experiences and aspirations of residents. I feel this model holds promise for further development.

Takeaway for practice: As we search practitioners' success stories for strategies and outcomes to emulate, it is important to identify which factors made a difference to outcomes. Those seeking to copy Vancouver's success will find some elements of the Vancouver case unique. However, Vancouver planners also developed engagement techniques and management strategies with wide applicability.

Keywords: Vancouver, practice, experiential planning, community engagement, urbanism

Research support: This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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In opening *The Prospect of Cities*, John Friedmann (2002) opined,

The city is dead. As it grew in population and expanded horizontally, many attempted to rescue it, to revive it, to hold back urban sprawl, to recover a sense of urbanity and civic order. But the forces that led to its demise could not be held back, much less reversed. (p. xi)

Today Friedmann lives in Vancouver, BC, a city that has topped *The Economist's* list of the most livable cities in the world since 2002 (BBC News, 2002; CNN, 2005; Economist.com, 2007, 2008). Over the last decade Vancouver has become an internationally acclaimed model of a good city. Unlike so many North American cities, Vancouver resisted the forces of sprawl and decay that threatened it. Harcourt, Cameron, and Rossiter (2007) described Vancouver in the 1960s as low density and lacking urban character. Its municipal authorities began considering urban renewal and downtown expressways to address blight. Ultimately, though, Vancouver leaders rejected those options. How did Vancouver transform itself from provincial backwater to a world-class city, and what role did planning play in the transformation? Punter (2003) and Harcourt et al. (2007) suggested that a series of good political and planning decisions changed Vancouver's trajectory, resulting in the dynamic and diverse city that now wins awards and entices respected planning academics to relocate.

What lessons can a city seen as socially progressive and urbane offer to planning practice and theory? In recent decades Vancouver has adopted policies to mandate the inclusion of affordable and family housing in new developments, and has established design policies and strategies to permit high-rise development and medium-to-high densities. Consequently, many planners view Vancouver as the exemplar of a modernist city that attempts to be socially inclusionary while adapting new urbanism principles for urban design (Berelowitz, 2005).

This article presents one account of Vancouver's success. By sharing some stories from the practice of Larry Beasley, one of the Vancouver planners credited with a significant role in

the social and urban transformation of the city, I offer some answers to Forester's (1999) question: "How are we to structure and encourage democratic deliberations in which participants can learn so much that their senses of hope and possibility, relevance and significance, interests and priorities shift?" (p. 203). Many accounts of the last three decades of urban history in Vancouver suggest that the planning process helped shift the perspectives of local residents to embrace a new kind of urban form and a new image of the good city (Berelowitz, 2005; Punter, 2003). Beasley coined the phrase "experiential planning" to describe how planners catalyzed the process of urban transformation in Vancouver.

I begin by describing the changes in Vancouver, and then move to tell some of Beasley's stories and consider his theory of practice. I profile the perspective of one planner rather than testing hypotheses or rigorously interrogating factual claims. I aim to develop insights into the way a high-profile practitioner explains his work, and seek to make sense of a lifetime of practice.

<1 Vancouver: Poster City for Urbanism /1>

Since 1968 the City of Vancouver and its suburban municipalities have collaborated within a regional authority, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), now included within the entity called Metro Vancouver. In 1969, the GVRD hired planner Harry Lash and began a public consultation process that resulted in a plan for a "livable region" (Lash, 1977). Livability became a watchword for the region at that time, and has remained so. Despite municipal autonomy, local governments have voluntarily cooperated on planning and infrastructure matters. The provincial government's policy of protecting agricultural land limited the availability of land for development and forced plans throughout the Vancouver region to accommodate this as a constraint (Smith & Haid, 2004). This drew planners' attention to the need for urban and suburban densification by the early 1970s.

In 1972, British Columbia politics took a significant step to the left with the election of a New Democrat provincial government and a radical city council in Vancouver under the new alliance of The Electors Action Movement (TEAM) and the Council of Progressive Electors (COPE; Punter, 2003).¹ The new city council,² committed to the idea of a livable city, hired a dynamic, young director of planning, Ray Spaxman. Under Spaxman's leadership, Vancouver planners began to overturn conventional planning wisdom (Harcourt et al., 2007; Punter, 2003).

For instance, while scholarly planning authorities in Canada criticized apartment living as leaving children “caged in their high-rise trap” (Gertler & Crowley, 1977, p. 339), Vancouver encouraged families to return to the city through redevelopment projects like False Creek South (see Figure 1) in the 1970s (Vischer, 1984). Larry Beasley and Ann McAfee, who went on to become co-directors of planning in Vancouver’s period of most intensive development, joined the planning team during Spaxman’s early initiatives.

[Figure 1 about here.]

When Vancouver was chosen to host the World’s Fair, Expo ‘86, provincial and federal financial resources assisted regional authorities in creating a regional rapid transit system to link suburban municipalities to the city (Harcourt et al., 2007). An excellent system of pedestrian and cycling trails was built in the city at the same time. External conditions that spurred increasingly high immigration and investment levels from Asia, beginning in the 1980s, encouraged rapid growth in the city as well as in suburban municipalities. Vancouver adopted its “Living First” policy – to facilitate residential growth downtown -- in the 1980s to guide redevelopment of waterfront land made available following the dismantling of the fairgrounds of Expo’86 (Beasley, 2000). Through an extensive public consultation process to consider options, residents and authorities came to a new consensus that instead of building freeways and bridges they would find ways to encourage more people to live downtown to reduce commuting.

With its urban revitalization projects, Vancouver specifically opted to create household diversity downtown. Taking the risk of pushing to intensify residential development in the urban core, Vancouver demonstrated the viability of the compact city model and established an enhanced role for urban design in place-making. Dozens of slender glass towers with mixed-use bases now grace the Vancouver skyline (see Figure 2), illustrating the recent massive inflow of residents and capital to the urban core (Berelowitz, 2005; Hutton, 1998). The city has facilitated developing new commercial uses to meet residents’ daily needs downtown (Beasley, 2000). Over 44,000 people have moved downtown in the last 25 years (see Table 1), increasing the proportion of City of Vancouver residents there from 10.4% to 15.2%. Close to 7,000 children now live in the core. In recent years the city has opened new schools and created parks downtown. Policy requires that developers create a mix of housing that includes row housing and apartments, rental and ownership units, market and non-market units, and small and family-sized units. With a mix of uses throughout the urban core, and buildings that address the street to

create an attractive pedestrian realm, Vancouver became a noted example of high-rise new urbanism (Grant, 2006).

[Figure 2 and Table 1 about here]

Urban leaders across the United States have sent delegates to learn from Vancouver's achievements (Baker, 2005; O'Connor, 2007). Organizations like MIT (Vale, 2007), the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU, 2006), and the Canadian Institute of Planners (2008) have recently presented awards to Vancouver planners. Clearly, the profession recognizes that Vancouver's experience offers important lessons about producing good cities.

Writing 25 years ago, Eversley described the planner as "universally feared and disliked" (1973, p. 3). Recent analyses of Vancouver's experience show quite the opposite; planners there enjoy considerable respect and receive public credit for facilitating the city's transformation to a vibrant urban showcase (Punter, 2003). What stories do these planners tell about the keys to their success in practice? This article investigates that question with Larry Beasley, arguably the best known of Vancouver's planners.³ Beasley merits particular attention because of the role he has played within the new urbanism movement. A vigorous proponent of urbanism and believer in the value of modernist high-rise architecture, Beasley stimulated a debate about urban character and architecture within the CNU that some traditionalists resisted ("Tall-building Controversy," 2008, p. 7). Thus Beasley has had considerable influence on the development of community design theory and practice.

Widely honored at home and abroad, Larry Beasley retired as Director of Current Planning in 2006 after 30 years of service with the city. A member of the Order of Canada (the highest national honor in Canada), a co-winner of the Kevin Lynch Prize from MIT, and the recipient of an honorary degree from Simon Fraser University, Beasley has become an iconic figure in Canada and abroad. Recently a Vancouver developer named a 33-storey mixed-use building after him (VancouverReflections.com, 2008). Prolific public speaker, international planning consultant, and author (e.g., Beasley, 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2006), Beasley is a highly successful planning practitioner, and acclaimed internationally as an agent of urban transformation. Yet he has said that when he began practice, planners were often seen as part of the problem for cities (Beasley, 2004a). What role did planners play in changing this situation in Vancouver? What skills and strategies did they use?

Analysts like Sandercock (2003, p. 158) warn that theory about best practices derived from case studies may mislead because local conditions shape places and outcomes. However, case studies of practitioners (e.g., Forester, 1999; Grant, 1994; Hoch, 1994; Krumholz & Forester, 1990; Throgmorton, 1996) reveal the practical challenges planners face in their work, and the frustrations they experience. Forester (1999) suggests that “the insightful analysis of planning situations can encourage better practice not by producing abstract lessons but by showing what can be done through practitioners’ vivid, instructive, and even moving accounts of their successes and failures” (p. 7). Since so much planning practice relies on emulation and the borrowing of standards and methods from other places, understanding the strategies for success in Vancouver and the challenges planners met in trying to achieve its ambitious social agenda may inspire and educate others. Personal insights from practitioners complement the evaluations of plans and policies, and show what is involved in making plans that matter (e.g., see Burby, 2003; Dalton, 1990; Talen, 1996).

Earlier generations of Canadian planning practitioners (Blumenfeld, 1987; Carver, 1975; Gertler, 2005; Lash, 1977) established the tradition of reflective thinking and writing about their work. Schön’s (1983) call to the profession to learn from practice seems to strike a chord with Beasley as well. In an article published in *Plan Canada* summarizing his conference keynote address, Beasley (2004a) drew on his life lessons to enjoin planners to be visionary guides for communities. Beasley argued that every planner is a role model for others who follow and hence has the obligation to learn and teach the lessons of practice well.

Presenting Beasley’s stories acknowledges the authority of his influence in contemporary planning practice and theory. The analysis and excerpts that follow came from a series of telephone interviews I conducted with Beasley on four occasions between October 2, 2007 and January 7, 2009. I recorded and transcribed these interviews, and directly quote excerpts from them below. The conversations focused on the techniques and processes that Vancouver planners used, the challenges they faced, and the lessons they might offer planners elsewhere. Such a method cannot readily be replicated, but it produces unique evidence vital to interpreting events and drawing meaning from them. Moreover, it reveals valuable insights into the ways in which “deliberative practitioners” (to borrow Forester’s 1999 term) use and develop theory to inform and describe their practices.

<1 A Practitioner’s Perspective /1>

In Beasley’s stories of practice, Vancouver’s planning and urban success originated in political choices citizens and leaders made in the early 1970s that “changed everything.” Planners with new sensibilities reformed planning processes and objectives, inspired by the work of writers like Jane Jacobs (1961). Like many young planners in that post-urban renewal period, Beasley worked as a neighborhood planner under a nationally funded neighborhood improvement program aimed at regenerating older areas. In discussing the times, he described a political and planning culture of innovation, community engagement, and consensus building. By the mid-1980s when he took responsibility for leading the downtown planning process (see Excerpt 1), collaborative planning had become well-entrenched in Vancouver. Planners shaped the institutions and conditions that empowered citizens to participate in achieving their visions (Healey, 1997; Innes, 1994).

Excerpt 1. Consensus on urbanism.

I took over the planning of the downtown a few weeks after the close of Expo ’86, in January of 1987. We knew that we were going to face the planning of that huge area. The office market had essentially collapsed, as it had everywhere in North America, roughly in 1982-83. So we were in the position that we needed to rethink the city at that point. What was going to be our economic driver? What was going to be the shape of the city? We had vast areas for redevelopment. So we implemented a dreaming process starting in about 1988. And out of that process of everyone around the city talking, a collective conclusion came to the fore that our destiny could be pursued in a positive way if we could entice people to come back and live in the inner city. It was a community-wide consensus.

In fact, if there’s one thing that I have to say about Vancouver—the thing that’s been fascinating for me in practice here—is that, in the design community, in the planning community, among many politicians, and among many informed citizens, there has been a strong consensus about the vision of the city, about trying to pursue an urban future, of trying to bring the car into its proper balance with other modes of travel in terms of its influence on the shape of the city, in support of density. There’s been an almost intuitive consensus that tall buildings were not bad but that they had to be well designed. This, in my view, was set off and came together because of the TEAM council and the discussions that they brought about in the city.

With an urban population growing ever more diverse as a result of heavy immigration, how did Vancouver planners ensure the representativeness of planning processes? Beasley noted that staff designed processes and techniques to reach out broadly, even to the most disadvantaged in the community (see Excerpt 2). They used open houses, workshops, surveys, informal

meetings, newsletters, and various other strategies. The commitment to engagement permeated the municipal organization and became a central organizing principle. Beasley also noted that staff operated with the understanding that they had the responsibility to ensure that all constituencies were represented in presentations to city council.

Excerpt 2. Strategies for broadening engagement.

In all the public consultation that we do, we try to design techniques that fit the needs of the people involved rather than use techniques that are comfortable and convenient for the planner. Let's take the disadvantaged community of indigent men who live in small hotels. We put the staff person down in the lobby of the hotel and just sit and talk to the men as they come in and have their coffee. It is a much more informal engagement process. Whereas for single parents with small children, we may go to the childcare centre and talk to them there. For young families, we may start a conversation with the children who then take the message home to the parents; then in most cases a parent will not ignore a subject that a child is dealing with in school. You can take the public consultation into schools and reach parents who then can come back and participate with you.

We use various kinds of techniques. When you go very broadly you move back to polling and surveys and those kinds of techniques. They don't go deep but they go very broad. What you try to do in all cases is layer your findings on top of one another to see what kind of common themes tend to emerge. What unique themes suit certain kinds of groups in the community? On the one hand, we find often that general themes emerge that can become very useful throughout our policy making. On the other hand, sometimes special needs themes emerge that you want to make sure that you maintain some policy places for. ...

Most of the time, the outcome is more predictable if you have a very well articulated program that you have worked up with people. For example, when we did all of our plans, before we initiated the actual planning, we actually had a public engagement process about the planning process itself. I'll just use one example: the recent Downtown Transportation Plan, which was a later chapter of the Central Area Plan. We were out four to six months talking to special interest groups and downtown organizations about how this planning should take place. Who should be involved? What should be the kind of issues on the table? When we finally started the process we had an awful lot of people who felt they owned that process and therefore they were more inclined to participate. The more that people are engaged to believe in the process, the more likely that the process is going to be successful.

From 1992 to 1995 planning staff elaborated on the consultation model by involving thousands of residents in the process for creating "*CityPlan*", the long-term vision for Vancouver (McAfee, 1997, 2008). Staff saw their role as facilitating engagement and documenting its outcomes, allowing city council to identify the consensus and set policy. Equity,

diversity, and urban form concerns intertwined in this process, leading staff to develop new techniques to inform their approaches and to develop new ways to describe their successes (see Excerpt 3). Beasley argued that the commitment to urbanism grew naturally out of this process as community members learned with staff. In telling the story, Beasley continually emphasized the teamwork within the city that made innovation possible, acknowledging the leadership of the municipal council and of planners Spaxman and McAfee. He also suggested that developers adopted the new direction quickly, as they realized that higher density development would improve their return on investment.

Critics of *CityPlan* argued that with millions of dollars devoted to the process, participation became an end rather than a means in Vancouver, as planners spent years generating little more than wish lists (Seelig & Seelig, 1997). That perspective missed what Beasley said was important about the exercise. Participatory processes that simply “harvest opinion,” as Beasley put it, become mired in self-interest. Vancouver avoided that pitfall, Beasley said, by framing its questions carefully to facilitate learning. Encouraging residents to think about their own futures and those of their descendants created a moral framework for envisioning places capable of including a wide cross-section of potential residents. The innovative techniques Vancouver planners used helped residents to connect the ideas of affordability and urban diversity to their own personal experiences of place and their aspirations for the futures of their families and their city. Advancing equity planning concerns in the Vancouver context did not involve battles with political leaders or citizens’ groups, as in communities like Cleveland (Krumholz, 1996; Krumholz & Forester, 1990). Rather, planners aimed to understand what was important to people in their everyday lives and then to help them see how progressive planning choices could address those needs. The process thus facilitated change in participants’ values.

Excerpt 3. Engagement techniques.

CityPlan in the 1990s was a dramatic moment in the city and I will always give Ann McAfee and her team great credit for what they did. I mean, to have 100,000 people in some way contributing and to have 12,000 people very actively involved, it was a huge thing and it changed consciousness. CityPlan, though, was also the continuation of a tradition of engagement that has been going on since the 70s. The deep and institutionalized commitment to public engagement started with the TEAM council in the early 70s and under Ray Spaxman’s planning leadership. Literally every day planners and engineers and other civic officials are out in the community talking to people about issues. There’s something like half a

million letters a year that go out to inform people about developments. And those things have dramatically changed everything in the city and opened up extraordinary opportunities for city building. Because people have, in a sense, been educated by this process, about what's good and what's not so good and what works and what doesn't work. And they have more discerning eyes, as it were, which they express in their response to developments and at the polls and everywhere else....

The CityPlan process did start a conversation that I don't think we had before. And that was the conversation about what is going to actually happen to you if nothing changes. What's going to happen when your children need a home, need a place to live? Are they going to find a place in this community? Or must they be pushed somewhere else, either downtown or out to the far suburbs? And what's going to happen to you when you're old and you don't really want or need the house anymore? Are you going to be able to find a place in your community? And do you have enough people in your community to have the kind of community support facilities that you are calling for and you need? In that way we've been able to show people that if you don't have enough people, you don't have library services and all of that.

And that kind of conversation—which is not a conversation saying, “Density's good for you,” but a conversation saying, “What do you need your neighborhood to be for you?”—has been much more fruitful. With citizens, I think you have to start with what is good for them on their terms. And then if you can illustrate that some of the things that are good for them come from some intensification in their community and build up enough people with that understanding, at least you get an alternative to that small core group of NIMBYists that are there. And then, if you do it very carefully and very well, and you can illustrate that it's not destroying the community, then a lot of other people who really weren't paying too much attention start to shift to say, “It's been pretty good for us.” That approach changes opinions. And I think CityPlan started that conversation because the City just approached the whole problem in a different way. That was the great brilliance of CityPlan that is not often understood.

Having thought carefully about the implications of this sequence of mutual learning activities within Vancouver planning processes, Beasley coined the phrase *experiential planning* to embody his theory of what motivates citizens to do the right thing for their communities (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4. Experiential planning.

It struck me when I read a book a few years ago called “The Experience Economy” [Pine & Gilmore, 1999] that what was missing and what we were doing in Vancouver—but we hadn't put a name to it—was to try to create for people the experiences that they aspire to in their day-to-day lives in the city that houses and accommodates that day-to-day life. If we really put our attention there, in addition to our systemic view of the city that we've put most of our planning attention to, then we would start creating cities that draw an emotional connection to the people who are there. It would be a connection of affection,

of loyalty, of all those things, because the city becomes fulfilling for them. And as I've worked through that in my own mind, I have dubbed it "experiential planning" because it is a planning approach based on the experiential expectations of the users of that environment. What I like about it for me is that it brings together many of the things I believe in for planning. It brings together, for example, a very tangible rationale for the level of public involvement and engagement that we have with people. It illustrates the value of explicit urban design and developing policy and regulatory frameworks where urban design has a high imperative. And I hope it will start to deal with what I think, from a sustainability point of view, is one of the fundamental difficulties with moving forward—which is about the sustainable city being dense, being mixed-use, being diverse. In a democracy, we're not going to go very far if citizens' experience is leading them to a very unsustainable consumer pattern.

I think the planning epistemology that comes with this is not about just having focus groups and a superficial level of marketing analysis. It's about a fairly deep and continuous level of engagement with citizens, going beyond even the direct issues of material consumption to a lot more spiritual issues and other social issues and other things which really make up the totality of people's experience of the city. For example, I think that we might find that our country gets a lot more heavily into housing the homeless people of the country if, in fact, we tapped into what the experiential expectations were—not just of homeless people, but of other citizens seeing homeless people in their community. I'm not a cynic who says that most people don't care. I think a lot of people care, but they just don't know what to do about it and there's no way for their concern to be expressed through their actions.

Vancouver used these processes of public engagement to develop innovative policy that requires developers to provide 20% non-market units in new housing downtown. Beasley acknowledged the challenges in achieving that social objective,⁴ but argued that the principle has become so accepted that even wealthy neighborhoods expect to live by it (see Excerpt 5). The success of Vancouver's practice in encouraging social responsibility made Beasley a committed optimist who suggested that good planning practices can unleash good citizenship.

Excerpt 5. Affordable housing.

Right now, the amount of affordable housing in new developments is sitting at about 16%. The numbers aren't quite at 20%. But in a way, I've always been less worried about the numbers than I have about the philosophy behind the numbers: that the philosophy stays solid, that no neighborhood comes to exist without its component of social housing. The exact amount is never going to be enough. There are always waiting lists. We always want to do more, but now every neighborhood has a fair share. It becomes the way the city is built.

Interestingly enough, we had this great drama a couple of years ago where, in one of the neighborhoods in Coal Harbour [an upscale development area], there was a site and the Housing Office

thought, well, maybe this is a site the City could cash in because there had been a lot of pressure from the developer saying “You could use that money elsewhere to do a lot more social housing,” so the Housing Office raised that issue. And the neighbors all came out and said, “No. We want our share of social housing, too.” These are wealthy people! “We want our social housing. That’s a part of what we bought into is the social mix.” And the City backed away from that conversion and that housing is now built.

Beasley offered many examples of the way that the process of helping planners to work through issues needing resolution changed people’s perspectives (see Excerpt 6). From the siting of half-way houses, to accepting a policy legalizing accessory suites, to developing intensification policies: all the policy changes resulted from extensive consultation processes that changed popular opinion. Taking community concerns seriously and finding ways to negotiate agreements between residents and developers about how to resolve disagreements can, in Beasley’s view, result in success.

Excerpt 6. Resolving conflicts.

[We were proposing] a half-way house for convicted felons that were coming out of prison. We started this and the community rose up in opposition, based on their spontaneous thinking about what such a place might be and what the impacts might be. We started out with a couple of field locations where there really was no way a politician could make a decision and survive. We then pulled people together and learned about these facilities. We went and visited these facilities. We published the information and had a community discussion about that. We set up some guidelines that were then debated in the community. People started to understand what these facilities really were and the probabilities for difficulties really were. They got some security that [we would set conditions on the use]: for example, 24/7 supervision and conditions like that. With that in hand, and a set of locational criteria that had been put together by community people, we were then able to determine a site that was quite well received in the community—not unanimously—and is functioning as we speak.

To make public engagement processes work effectively, Beasley said, planners need to develop specific skill sets. He especially emphasized the need for mediation and negotiation skills, and for knowledge about effective urban design. Vancouver established an annual staff training budget to ensure that all its planners would have funds to facilitate upgrading. Since the city is only as effective as its staff, managers need to attend carefully to the effectiveness of their planners (see Excerpt 7). Beasley acknowledged some instances where he had to move and retrain planners who didn’t work well with a community.

Excerpt 7. Staff effectiveness.

I remember a couple of community-based processes where the planner wasn't paying attention. One process I remember where a very good young planner went out into a neighborhood and was working for a number of months. The community came to me and said, "We like this planner, but could you please remove this person because he's not dealing with the issues we care about." The planner had not been listening carefully enough and had a kind of sense of his own of what issues had to be dealt with. He wasn't listening to their issues, so that process went off the rails.

We had another case where the planner's personality simply did not work with the personality of the community. She was one kind of person and the community was predominantly different kinds of people; that didn't work.

It is very tricky putting planning teams out in the field. There is a feeling that you need a methodical process but you also have to carefully think about the personalities, the inclinations, the styles, the rhythms of the way people work and try to match those with a sense of how that is in the community. You have to do some training with your staff, so that they also get the sense of how to morph themselves into what they need to be for different kinds of community processes.

In Beasley's theory of practice, personality matters. Effective planning is not just about getting the process right: the way that the planner operates affects the prospects for success. Yet he also acknowledged that the political and planning system in Vancouver created the context within which planners could make innovations that prove challenging in other places (see Excerpt 8). Without political leaders willing to give planners the authority to negotiate uses and densities, Vancouver might be a different kind of place. The system, the players that operate within it, and the way it structures influence all play a part in determining outcomes.

Excerpt 8. Discretionary approvals.

One of the things that happened—and it related to the social housing policy, it related to the family housing policy, it related to the array of standards of public amenities, whether that was child care or community facilities or parks—was that the Mayor of the day, who really led a lot of this, Gordon Campbell, was a policy-oriented guy. On the one hand, it's just his nature. "I want to know what the rules are." On the other hand, he had come out of the development community and he felt the risk and anxiety that the developer feels when there are no rules. And also he was very dedicated to the public objectives of the city and so wanted to make sure that we did all these things. But he was also sensitive to the needs of the development community and felt we couldn't do them capriciously. So when we started to develop and we knew we were going to face developers of some very huge sites—250 acres, in the case of False Creek

North, 80 acres in the case of Coal Harbour—his drive for us as an organization was to “Put down on paper what it is that we’re going to want. Bring analysis to that to justify what it’s about, and let it be adopted politically before you go in to negotiate.” And wow! That was a very good way to do things because as a negotiator for the city, it meant that I could walk into a negotiation with people—who usually in these negotiations are much stronger than you are—with a lot of clarity and a lot of political support. And I knew that my council was behind me. So I could insist. ...

No negotiation between parties is a fruitful one both ways unless there’s power at both sides of the table. And by virtue of the power that’s been invested in the planners and those doing the negotiations on the civic side, we could broker real deals. Because the developers would not move without the planners and, in a sense, the planners could not move without the developers. It set up a dynamic where collaboration and interest-based negotiations could occur and they do occur every day in Vancouver. I think, by and large, most savvy developers now will say, “You know, it’s a system I can live with and I can see the benefits of.”

The discretionary approval process in Vancouver gave planners considerable authority to broker deals that implement principles of social inclusion and urban design. Critics of such processes may worry about backroom agreements or the potential for corruption, but Beasley explained the checks and balances in place to ensure that public purposes were addressed and planners remained accountable (see Excerpt 9). A Development Permit Board made decisions on developments in the city through a transparent public process that involved considering and presenting a body of evidence. City council allowed expert city staff to evaluate proposed projects in light of policy the council had adopted. Although political leaders in some communities may safeguard the right to decide whether developments proceed, in Vancouver the council delegated that task to staff. Beasley suggested that council members wanted to avoid any perception that they might be inappropriately influenced in making development decisions, but more importantly, they trusted senior staff to make the right decisions (and could fire them if they did not).

Excerpt 9. Development approvals.

Several factors protect the integrity of the discretionary regulatory process that we have in Vancouver. One is that it’s totally transparent. No matter who has a meeting with whom, ultimately the results of that come into the public realm as a matter of public knowledge and discussion. For example, if there is a meeting between the developer and a staff person on some aspects of project qualities or an amenity, no decision is made there. They come to a working premise that then goes to a public process:

either a council process or in our case a Development Permit Board process. The Development Permit Board sits in public and never makes decisions in camera [in closed session]. It is open to anyone to come and talk to it. The point is, it is very transparent and it's very accessible.

The second aspect that protects it is that it takes advice from a number of different perspectives and overlays that advice to create the choices that need to be made by the decision makers. There is an urban design perspective from the urban design panel. We are not looking for the citizen's view of things there; we are looking for design quality discussions. There is the community's view. There is the special needs view. There is the heritage view. Each one has their own process to engage the public and that is overlaid and put into the public report.

By the time something gets to a decision it's pretty clear who has been saying what. No one is in an omnipotent or power position to just do whatever they want. The Development Permit Board itself is a dynamic decision-making body and it makes most of the decisions on development.

How do planners avoid being pressured about decisions? Beasley noted that ensuring that the process is open and transparent protects the planner. Documenting all of the factors and all of the perspectives helps the participants understand the chain of reasoning that staff used to produce an outcome. Ultimately, though, Beasley insisted that good practice requires ethical practitioners (see Excerpt 10). Process cannot substitute for moral fiber.

Excerpt 10. Ethical practice.

Over the many years I was on the Development Board and involved in individual decisions having authority as Director of Planning, I never experienced a pressure of a personal type. The reason for that is that I was well paid, honored and I didn't care about any of that. I could make the decisions I needed to make based on the process.

Secondly, the process is so transparent it protected me from pressure. That's what I loved about the process. It had so many checks and balances that no one, not even politicians, could impress me. The way I made the judgment was so clear to everybody who's looking that A-B-C led to D. Not just "I felt like it that day": not just me, but also the people with power to make decisions.

Thirdly, was the overlay of different advice coming in. The way choices were made, you could see the advice, and how we reconciled the advice and made the decision. A skeptical person living in a society where there is a tendency towards a strong power base to form is going to say "that's subject to abuse". Yes it is subject to abuse. It takes ethical people to make it function. It is an aspect that often gets lightly dealt with when we talk about these processes. No process works if unethical people are working in that process. So you have to make sure that you choose ethical people and test them in that regard.

Beasley suggested that planners have a professional responsibility to get their analyses right. The planner maintains professional credibility and public respect by doing analysis fully, dispassionately, and fairly; in this, his view echoed that of Forester (1989). For Beasley the planner simultaneously plays a political and ethical role. The planner lobbies for social justice and good urban design, and innovates where it produces community benefits. Beasley argued that each planner's work matters because it affects the potential success of those who follow. Vancouver's contribution represented more than an idiosyncratic local development for Beasley; it constituted a natural experiment for new urbanism, recognized through awards as a trend-setting example of best practices (CNU, 2006).

<1 Lessons for Practice and Theory /1>

To what extent is Vancouver's experience unique? To what extent can others emulate it? The particular constellation of circumstances that created the "Vancouver achievement," as Punter (2003) described it, may not be readily replicated. However, Beasley insisted that people made significant choices that allowed such innovation (see Excerpt 11). Citizens get the kind of places they deserve. Studying effective practice clarifies the potential effects of particular choices and reveals the gamut of options available to those who want to change their future. Vancouver illustrates that if people elect progressive governments that hire progressive staff who use progressive strategies, they can generate progressive outcomes. For Beasley, planning permits purposive action.

Excerpt 11. Choice.

I always say, "You get the city you decide you want." I believe you have to decide what kind of city you aspire to as a community and then courageously change whatever you need to change to get there. Vancouver did have to change its regulatory system. It did have to change its political system. It did have to change its development management system. It did have to change its planning system and the way it engaged its public in order to achieve the things that we've [done]. I don't buy the critique [that Vancouver is unique]: I think, in a way, it allows people to be complacent about what they face in their communities.

History, politics, and geography all contributed to Vancouver's adopting socially progressive planning policies and encouraging forward thinking urban design. Electors' transformation of local politics in 1972 unleashed incredible potential. Political leadership

committed to principled, policy-based decision making gave staff the authority to act. Vancouver's system of electing municipal council members at large instead of on a ward basis gave political leaders the ability to take citywide rather than parochial perspectives. Its experience with hosting a world fair provided resources and redevelopment opportunities other cities envy. The city's location on the temperate Pacific Rim made it a magnet for immigration and investment.

Despite the unique features in the local system, however, Vancouver's experience indicates that planners who practice effectively, employing engagement techniques that help people learn, can exert a transformative influence. Practitioners in Vancouver built a tradition of practice that earned considerable respect (see Excerpt 12) by identifying issues and acknowledging varying perspectives, according to Beasley (see Excerpt 13). They avoided oversimplifying or ignoring differences. The process is not foolproof, but, Beasley implied, such humility increased their odds of success.

Excerpt 12. Respect.

In our system, even transportation is now jointly managed by Planning and Engineering, which is unusual in many cities. And that has also helped. The other factors are that planners are vested with real decision-making power in regard to development. And that, over time, just builds up a status and a stature for the planners where they are people to be reckoned with. Because ultimately when it comes down to development, they make the decisions. Through all of those measures—this combination of things—planning has never been marginalized here the way I see it in many places. I get really worried in some cities I go to when I see that the planners are not very important to what's going on. And then I see who is and I'm shocked.

What I found fascinating in Vancouver for at least the last decade with every single municipal election, right across the political parties, one of the first things that happens is that every political party declares its support for planning and the planners. It's something they almost have to do because the planners are very highly respected by the electorate, by the population. And part of that is because we've delivered hundreds of millions of dollars of public goods—and the population knows that—through the negotiated process enabled by discretionary zoning. Partly it's because the planners are out there on the street every day in a highly participatory process and citizens see that and they remember that. And partly, it's because we have been putting forward cutting-edge propositions and bringing them to ground, not just talking about them but bringing them to ground in development after development after development.

In Vancouver, reform-minded politicians used planning processes to initiate an ambitious social agenda. Enabling an engaging collaborative process permitted planners to reinforce the social and urban agenda and keep it active even as political regimes changed. Success bred success to the point where planners came to enjoy the respect of citizens and political leaders alike. Through the process of experiential planning, of framing meaningful visions in the context of the everyday experiences and aspirations of ordinary residents, Vancouver planners influenced the politics and outcomes of daily life in the city. By understanding and engaging citizens and politicians, the planners built an effective constituency for planning that helped residents to re-frame their understanding of urban issues and options.

Excerpt 13. Humility.

Sometimes what we do is say “Okay here is the array of public opinion. In this clustering of opinion you have a significant majority of citizens agreeing on these items. In this array of opinion you have a significant minority of citizens agreeing on this item. Here you have special interest minorities agreeing on items.” You just lay all that out.

What often happens in documentation of public consultation is that the people doing the management of it oversimplify. They turn it into zero-sum documentation, which is to say that “most people said this.” Often with the richness of opinion it's important to know that most people said something, some significant minorities might have said something else, and small minorities said something else. Perhaps this helps to identify the minorities that have special needs and special concerns. You document and put all that down so it can be understood.

In fact in our city vision process when we ended up pulling the policies into place, we articulated where a policy was strongly endorsed by that community and where policy was more modestly endorsed by that community – so that when decision-making came later and council was making decisions on particular things, they knew where [people stood].

Many cities are now trying to emulate Vancouver’s success. Some do that by copying the outcomes: by developing urban design policies that code for skinny towers with townhouses and commercial uses at the base. While imitation may be a sincere form of flattery, in planning it risks creating new forms of conformity or locally inappropriate options. Some cities are adopting discretionary approval processes to give staff the authority to negotiate design improvements with developers. While such processes can enhance the quality of design, they also carry the potential that planners may find themselves being accused of being anti-democratic and open to corruption if safeguards are insufficient.

Beasley's story is not a view of the heroic planner single-handedly reshaping the city, or cleverly identifying the particular outcome or strategy that can change history. Instead his experience reinforces the fundamental significance of planning process and organization: these are the key messages of planning theory as well. Vancouver's success represents an argument for ensuring the effectiveness of the planning team, of taking the time and committing the resources to find solutions that work locally, of committing to mutual learning with political leaders and community members, and of reflecting on and learning from mistakes. Beasley's interpretations give the insider's perspective on what others have called "city making in paradise" (Harcourt et al., 2007) or the "Vancouver achievement" (Punter, 2003).

Interviews with practitioners present richly textured and nuanced understandings of the relationship between politics and planning practice in ways that further the development of planning theory. While such methods do not lend themselves to ready replication, the stories generated provide a body of evidence through which planning scholars may articulate and interrogate theories of practice. At the same time, planners' stories reveal the ways that practitioners employ and develop theory to account for their successes and failures. Beasley's comments reflected one planner's locally situated theory of planning practice. He described the planner as a powerful force for social transformation working in a responsive way with community members and political leaders to achieve values of social justice and urbanity reinforced and reproduced through effective planning processes. With power comes the responsibility to behave ethically and professionally. With appropriate practice the planner earns societal admiration and respect. Beasley's concept of experiential planning encapsulated the notion of a socially just and politically responsive participatory process in pursuit of good city form and function. That notion has powerful rhetorical potential for a profession committed to positive social change.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Larry Beasley for consenting to almost four hours of interviews and allowing me to publish excerpts here. Thanks to Jeff Haggett for his assistance with transcription, and to the reviewers and editors for helpful comments on the manuscript.

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Table 1. Population change in Vancouver, 1981 to 2006.

Census year	Downtown area ^a	Population		
		City of Vancouver	Vancouver region	
1981	43,206	414,280	1,268,183	
2001	70,091	545,671	1,986,965	
2006	87,975	578,041	2,116,581	

Sources: Metro Vancouver (2007), City of Vancouver (2003a, 2003b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d).

Note:
 a. The downtown area includes the Downtown and West End neighborhoods.



Figure 1. False Creek South provided a mix of housing types on former industrial lands.



Figure 2. Vancouver has become well known for its slender towers with bases that address the street, containing a mix of residential and commercial uses.

Notes:

¹ As Higgins (1986, p. 246) notes, explaining when the reform era began is easier than explaining why the shift occurred. In 1968, Canadians elected Pierre Elliott Trudeau on a platform of participatory democracy. The early 1970s saw progressive city governments elected in several cities, including Toronto. Most of the progressive governments were short-lived, but Vancouver's transformation continued even under subsequent regimes.

² Several members of the TEAM and COPE parties came either from the academic ranks of local universities or from the community groups that had challenged plans for urban renewal (Harcourt et al., 2007; Punter, 2003).

³ Since 1972 Vancouver has developed under three planning regimes. Ray Spaxman was director from 1972 to 1994. From 1994 to 2006 Larry Beasley and Ann McAfee were co-directors of

planning. Beasley was in charge of current planning (development activities) while McAfee was in charge of long range or strategic planning. The current director is Brent Toderian.

⁴ Critics such as Swanson and Yan (2006) suggest that the city's policies for downtown increase the risk of gentrification and displacement that worsen instead of improve the ability to provide affordable housing.